

Challenge Three: Access to Quality Instruction in High-Need Schools

ACCESS TO QUALITY INSTRUCTION IN HIGH-NEED SCHOOLS

How can collective bargaining agreements and other joint policies and structures be used to rapidly improve the quality of instruction in schools that have the greatest academic need? Are there novel teaching assignments, career paths and incentives that will draw educators to serve more challenging students? What special considerations or carve-outs might be necessary to successfully implement college- and career-ready (CCR) standards in turnaround schools to rapidly change student outcomes? A group of state and local education labor and district leaders convened in July 2013 by the U.S. Department of Education and its partners addressed these questions.

The group explored the questions in depth, proposing a number of solutions to the challenge of increasing access to high-quality instruction in high-need schools. Several key themes emerged from its discussions. First was a commitment to a team approach to solving the problem, whether it be teams of teachers and administrators directing the implementation of CCR standards at the school level, teams of teachers hired by schools as units and given the authority to operate outside the box of some school or district policies and practices, or teams of union- and district- appointed leaders overseeing the implementation of instructional leadership teams across school districts. In fact, group members posited that strong teams of teachers and leaders are the bedrock of high-functioning, high-need schools and have the ability to significantly impact the entire culture of the school.

The second theme that emerged in the course of the discussion was that very thing: the importance of school culture, one in which there are high expectations for students, teachers and administrators and one in which there is significant support for teachers. There is the possibility that this culture can thrive, group members agreed, if labor and management foster authentic team environments and some degree of autonomy.

A third theme that emerged from the discussion is this notion that high-needs schools and teams of teachers and administrators operating within them need more autonomy, not less. In the high functioning high-need schools, the solutions group imagined, the district grants principals more autonomy, and the principals in turn are confident enough to share decision-making authority with teachers. The school leaders, as the group discussed, oversee strong professional learning programs *and* expect good instruction.

These three themes coalesce in the two potential solutions the group chose to explore in depth.

SOLUTION 1: Strategically staff high-need schools by posting and hiring for team vacancies, not individual vacancies.

SOLUTION 2: Provide school-based Instructional Leadership Teams the authority to implement college- and career-ready standards and develop school culture necessary to support high- quality implementation.

As noted by the group, school districts can apply one or both of these solutions to increase student access to quality instruction, particularly in high-need schools.

Solution 1: Strategically staff high-need schools by posting and hiring for team vacancies, not individual vacancies.

Game-changing innovations, group members agreed, can occur when labor and management collaborate to increase student success. Solution one is a potential game-changer, the team decided. It calls for labor and management to agree to grant individual schools the authority to attract, recruit, hire and retain highly effective **teams** of teachers, not just individual teachers.

“If we are thinking about bold moves, we often don’t talk about an explicit focus in addressing the pervasive achievement gaps that exist... we must change our approach and handle this in a different way.”

- *Mary Ronan*
Solutions group member

The solutions group agreed that the approach is bold. It is a dramatic shift in school district human capital management practice. The prospective benefits of recruiting, hiring and retaining teams of teachers, however, can outweigh the short-term inconvenience caused by shifting hiring practices. This is especially true if one considers the end result of this solution. If successful, suggested the group, this solution might result in the increased retention of teachers; an increase in the number of effective teachers working in high-need schools; and, most importantly, increased student achievement, reduced student dropout rates, lower student churn and lower discipline rates.

Promising Solutions for Future Exploration

In addition to discussing two solutions in depth, the group identified four additional promising solutions to increase access to quality instruction in high-need schools.

Solution: Use novel approaches to extend the reach of effective teachers.

- Labor and management should unite to identify innovative ways to extend the footprint of effective teachers in a district or school. This could include using distance learning, enabling effective teachers to volunteer to take on larger class sizes or positioning them to lead teams of other teachers.

Solution: Allow a labor and management collaborative body to identify high-need schools – rather than the state.

- Currently, states identify high-need schools based on a list of criteria determined at the state level. To make the process more reflective of local needs, the solutions group suggested that a collaboration of labor and management would be better suited to make the identifications.

Solution: Enact both monetary and non-monetary incentives for teachers to move to high-need schools.

- To increase the prestige of the teaching profession, the solutions group discussed enacting monetary and non-monetary incentives for teachers to move to high-need schools. This would help ensure that the most effective teachers are working with the most at-risk students. It is important to note, here, however, that there was not uniform agreement among the group about whether monetary incentives will deliver desired results.

Solution: Create a longer school turnaround cycle.

- Current school turnaround cycles are set at three year intervals. The solutions group suggested that increasing the cycle would be more reflective of the time it takes to build a team, improve instruction and turn around a school.

What Steps are Necessary to Staff High-Need Schools by Posting and Hiring for Team Vacancies?

Once labor and management jointly agree to attract, recruit, hire and retain teams of teachers, the solutions group noted that they will then have to determine the team design, composition and targeted deployment. For example, schools might create teams to span a single content area or possibly grouped content areas. They might be focused on a single grade level or bands of grade levels within a school. The teams might vary in size as well. That is, a school might hire one or more teams of three to five teachers. Other schools might choose to hire teams of five to eight teachers, while still others— such as turnaround schools— might choose to hire the entire faculty in teams. Some members of the solutions group were quick to point out that the teams should include a principal as well.

After schools determine the composition of the teams they plan to hire, the group discussed how the schools might work with their districts to post the team positions and accept applications. Ultimately, the prospective candidates would apply as a unit to the school, interview together and, if hired, function together as a team that would likely share students.

To ensure a highly effective team, noted the solutions group, all team members should meet hiring criteria established by the union and school district. Criteria for hiring might include evidence of successful implementation of CCR standards and improved student performance. Group members discussed how these teachers should also provide evidence that they

“If you want to stay here, then this is the commitment you need to make to this building...”

- Julie Sellers
Solutions group member

have certain dispositions necessary to succeed in challenging environments: “grit,” “stick-to-itiveness,” and an ability to live up to the expectation that “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

For long-term success and continuity, the group agreed that teachers who are hired as part of a team should be ready to make a three- to five-year commitment to the school and the team.

“We must provide incentives for teachers to attract highly effective teachers to high-need schools. This can be done in different ways, including monetary and non-monetary incentives. If you want innovation, there must be room for autonomy.”

- Shannon Brown
Solutions group member

What Critical Design Elements Should Be Considered When Posting and Hiring for Teams?

Solutions group members discussed that there is power in a team of motivated teachers banding together to deploy in a high-need school. To jumpstart this approach, they speculated, districts can consider a collection of incentives to encourage teachers to build their own teams and apply to a high-need school. Districts can offer monetary incentives, such as three-to-five year retention bonuses, bonuses for student growth and, as one solution team member suggested, permanent movement on the salary schedule for exceptional student growth. Incentives can also be non-monetary (and some participants suggested that all the incentives should be non-monetary), such as opportunities to pursue advanced degrees, National Board Certification, or other similar professional opportunities. These incentives can in fact be pursued by a team, increasing their power and potential impact. Imagine, as one solutions team member

suggested, an entire team pursuing National Board Certification at the same time.

When appropriate, group members agreed, unions and school districts should grant these teams increased autonomy and responsibility. For instance, if a team member leaves the school, the remaining team members might have the authority to hire her replacement. By union and district agreement, for further example, the team could develop and implement its own professional development strategies, choose its own curriculum, abandon district pacing guides and/or interact with parents as an independent unit of the school.

The solutions group suggested that increased accountability would have to accompany this increase in autonomy. For instance, the union and school district would have to agree to the metrics for an evaluation process that might be aligned to successful implementation of CCR standards.

As schools and/or districts hire teams and strategically merge them into schools, partners must be prepared to address the tension that might develop between these special teams of teachers and other teachers in the school, acknowledging, among other things, that there are already highly effective teachers in these schools.

What Are Possible Barriers to Implementation?

In advancing this reform, the solutions group identified at least four potential barriers to which stakeholders must be sensitive:

1. **Reaching a negotiated agreement on how to post vacancies.** It might take districts and unions time to navigate their own internal processes before they can come to a joint agreement on how to post vacancies.

2. **Blending autonomous teams into a culture that generally lacks autonomy.** The culture in high-need school is typically based on lack of autonomy, making it difficult for more autonomous teams to operate with more leeway.
3. **Warming teachers and leaders up to the notion of team-based hiring.** Teachers and leaders are not accustomed to the practice of team-based hiring and have no experience recruiting teammates for joint application to a school. This new practice requires a profound cultural shift for applicant and employer.
4. **Paying attention to teachers already in the school, while merging in new teams.** Teachers presently teaching at the school might feel overlooked or under-supported as new teams merge into the building. Leaders need to support and develop all teachers in the building, mitigating perceptions that the team or teams receive(s) special treatment.

Solution 2: Provide School-based Instructional Leadership Teams the Authority to Implement CCR Standards and Develop School Culture that Supports High-Quality Implementation.

The group's second solution calls for the creation of school-based Instructional Leadership Teams (ILTs) that will have the authority to make autonomous decisions about the implementation of CCR standards and to develop and strengthen a school culture that supports excellent instruction and the execution of new standards.

To function at an optimal level, the ILT would have enhanced autonomy – jointly granted by labor and management – to select and develop curriculum, make staffing decisions, develop the school schedule and select materials. The solutions group discussed how it would be responsible for developing and maintaining a culture of high expectations for all students and staff and a culture of collaboration. Additionally, it would be charged with creating and administering feedback loops necessary to assess the quality of CCR standards implementation. The feedback loops would also assess instructional needs, quality of school culture and help determine the focus for professional development.

A district-based ILT, suggested the group, would provide support to school-based ILTs and be responsible for ensuring that they have the resources they need for success. These district-based ILTs would be comprised of employees selected by both labor and management.

“When you are looking at the challenges of high-needs schools, we should look at the role of these ILTs as different. They need more flexibility, not less.”
- Segun Eubanks, Director of Teacher Quality
National Education Association

What Steps Are Necessary to Implement the Structure?

First, the group agreed, implementation of high-quality school- and district-based ILTs require labor and management to institutionalize their commitment to using ILTs as key levers for CCR standards implementation and the improvement of instruction in high-need schools. Group members debated whether these agreements should be formal or informal. Some expressed the belief that an articulated commitment can occur outside of collective bargaining agreements, through a memorandum of understanding or less formal

agreement between a school board and a bargaining unit. Others suggested that the union and district collectively bargain ILTs into contracts. Whether collectively bargained or not, team members agreed that the agreement should spell out the composition of the team, the criterion for membership and the selection process.

Furthermore, the group discussed the notion that those constructing an ILT in a high-need school should pay much more attention to the cultural literacy and competency of potential members. This includes their prior success with students with disabilities and English language learners.

The solutions group also focused its attention on how ILT members should be selected. The team explored a number of options. Some districts might decide that labor and management should jointly appoint members. Others might have the principal appoint members in consultation with a building representative or other labor leader. Local context matters here, the group decided. So does the extent to which there is a high quality working relationship between labor and management.

Group members did not agree on the level of autonomy that the ILTs would have but did decide that labor and management would need to develop a process for determining the level of authority ILTs should have to select curriculum and hire and make staffing decisions. As part of this decision-making process, the solutions group suggested that labor and management consider the following questions:

- Is autonomy granted to the ILT carte blanche?
- Should it be earned?
- Should it increase over time?

Finally, the group turned its attention to the district-based ILT, that entity that the team imagined would oversee and support school-based ILTs. As with school-based ILTs, the union and school district will

need to decide on a process to select members of the district ILT. Again, the group discussed whether this process should be determined through less formal agreements than those collectively bargained. Some posited that collective bargaining should not be ruled out because local context and history might demand it.

The team discussed how the union and the school district will also have to agree on a process the district-level ILT will use to evaluate the efficacy of each ILT, provide ILTs with support as necessary and put in place a process for dismantling and potentially replacing teams that are not performing well. A key training activity will likely be helping ILTs develop feedback loops to monitor implementation of CCR standards and the development of a school-based culture necessary to support it.

At the school level, group members acknowledged, the principal and his or her fellow ILT members will play important roles in planning for CCR standards implementation, identifying instructional and professional development goals for the year, drawing up schedules to support implementation and using what is learned from training to design feedback loops. The feedback loops are aimed at monitoring the progress teachers are making, gauging the success of implementation and determining whether school culture is improving.

What Are Possible Barriers to Implementation?

The solutions group pinpointed three possible barriers that could prevent ILTs from successfully exercising their autonomy to provide students with high-quality instruction aligned to CCR standards:

1. **ILTs might not have a great track record.** ILTs, in one form or another, have been around a long time, group members acknowledged. It is very easy to have an ILT but very difficult to have an

effective one. In fact, one member of the solutions group suggested that the ILT approach was not a bold solution to the challenge of ensuring that students in high-need schools receive high-quality instruction. If labor and management commit to using this structure to promote CCR standards implementation in high needs schools, then they will have to make a bold commitment to feedback loops, evaluating the performance of ILTs, supporting ILTs that need it and replacing those that are not functioning well. Otherwise, group members noted, ILTs will struggle to be successful.

2. **A lack of experience.** Neither teachers nor administrators have a lot of experience overseeing something as complex as implementation of CCR standards. Both district- and school-based leadership teams will need substantial training and support to meet their objectives and ensure the ultimate success and efficacy of the ILT.
3. **Recognizing some leaders may not participate.** A lack of trust between labor and management may make the selection process of leadership team members difficult and potentially onerous. Ultimately, some leaders might be unwilling to participate in such a shared leadership structure.

Reflections from the Convening Co-sponsors

The academic demands of CCR standards will be greatest in high need schools. Achievement gaps could actually grow as students are challenged with the new, higher expectations. We need schools and districts whose climates and cultures, use of time, approaches to staffing, use of technology, deployment of support services, and engagement of families and communities are optimized to continuously improve outcomes for the students they serve. Further, we

must be prepared to get the best teachers and principals to the highest-need students (including low-income students, minority students, English learners, and students with disabilities), and to ensure that all students have access to the other resources (such as technology, instructional materials, and social, health, and nutritional services) necessary to support their academic success. Together all stakeholders—parents, teachers, school boards, superintendents and administrators, business leaders, and community members—must take responsibility for the academic and social well-being of the students in our charge and engage in the strong, consistent, and sustained collaboration critical to making improvement possible.

A Word about This Brief

In late July 2013, as an extension to its 2011 and 2012 convenings to maximize labor-management collaboration, the U.S. Department of Education, in partnership with numerous national organizations, hosted state and local education leaders at GE Foundation’s *Summer Conference for Educators*. Specifically, convening organizers asked participants to consider how structures and systems of collaborative labor relations—including collective bargaining and other agreements, joint committees and structures, and policies and practices—could be harnessed to better support teachers and leaders in implementing CCR standards. Convening organizers grouped participants in one of five teams each charged to consider one of five distinct CCR standards implementation challenges: *Professional Development, Instructional Teamwork, Access to Quality Instruction in High-Need Schools, Student Time* and *Curricular and Instructional Materials*.

This brief represents the best thinking of the *Access to Quality Instruction in High-Need Schools* solutions group, which investigated the following questions:

- How can collective bargaining agreements and other joint policies and structures be used to rapidly improve the quality of instruction in schools that have the greatest academic need?
- Are there novel teaching assignments, career paths and incentives that will draw educators to serve more challenging students?
- What special considerations or carve-outs might be necessary to successfully implement CCR standards in turnaround schools to rapidly change student outcomes?